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ABSTRACT

This study compared parent and nursery staff perceptions of preschool children. Perceptions were examined from one parent and two caregivers for each of seven children. Aspects of the child's perceived personality and response to learning were also investigated, as were the expectations and judgments brought to the situation by each adult. In addition, perceptions of the home-preschool situation and its impact on the child were studied. The results were analyzed in terms of each child and the triad of adults related to him or her, with a particular focus on the child with the highest score on the First Step Screening test, a child who scored just above average, and the child with the lowest score. Issues relating to negative attributions of a child's ability based on test scores became evident. The results raise important questions about how children are perceived and, more particularly, what kind of attributions are made when children are thought to be having difficulties with aspects of their learning and development. The significance of this issue is that if difficulties are attributed to the wrong causes, there is less likelihood of them being properly understood and appropriately supported. (JPB)

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Match or Mismatch The perceptions of parents of nursery age children related to those of the children's key workers.

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J. Santer
E. Hall

outline of the study

This was a small pilot study which wanted to explore the best methods for looking at differences and similarities in perspective between parents, practitioners and children. We wanted to know how specific children were viewed by their main home carer and the two nursery staff with greatest responsibility for them . Three adults were therefore interviewed about each child. We particularly wanted to know about the child's perceived personality and response to learning and the particular expectations and judgements brought to the situation by the three respective adults.We also wanted to know how the respective adults viewed the home-pre-school situation and how this might impact on the child. In order to systematically examine the perspectives of the three adults individual semi-structured interviews were carried out and embedded within these were 17 questions which they were asked to rate on a scale of 1-5. There were 7 children in the pilot study so seven triads of three interviews were carried out which led to a total of 21 interviews. 14 with practitioners and 7 with parents. Questions were centred around 6 themes or areas including

1. What the child is like in terms of personality and behaviour and why.

2. Their relationship to the child and managing the child's behaviour

3.Their views on the child's development and learning.

4. Their perceptions of the child at nursery.

5. Home-nursery relationships

6. Influences on the parent/practitioners own expectations and attitudes to bringing up and educating the child.

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Where appropriate the same open ended questions were asked of parents and practitioners so both were asked for example what the child was like in terms of personality. Similarly where appropriate the same specific questions were asked for rating on a five point scale so both parents and practitioners were asked to rate whether they considered the child mature or immature. Other open and rateable questions were specific to the role of either parents or practitioners so parents were asked what their main reason for sending the child to nursery was and professionals were asked about how relevant they felt their training was to their present practice.

In addition to the interview both parents and practitioners were asked to complete the Culture Free Self Esteem Inventory (Battle 1992) and a devised specific self-efficacy scale related to developing the child's pre-reading skills. The specific self-efficacy scale asked adults to rate how confident or influential they thought they were on a number of items related to their promotion of the child's pre-reading skills.

The children involved in the research were informally observed in their nursery setting and when they were familiar and comfortable with the adult researcher the First Step Screening test for evaluating pre-schoolers was carried out. This test is specifically designed for use with children in the 3 to 6 year old age group and is well standardised with good reliability and validity. The test consists of a number of sub-tests, three of which, cognitive domain, language domain and motor domain are totalled to give a composite score. For each domain an indication is given of scores that would be in the normal range, of some concern and of definite concern. It is emphasised that these scores should never be used on their own but as part of a wider clinical picture and that as a preliminary screening test any atypical results would need repeating and follow up with more in depth testing and consultation with familiar adults. As well as being able to compare the scores of the target children to the standardised norms other children in the nursery were also screened so that the child's performance relative to the general standards of the children in the nursery could be compared.

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Outcomes

The interviews were analysed on a question by question basis as well as in terms of themes and attributions. In particular interviews were analysed in triads relating to each specific child and the attributions made about the child by the three adults involved were compared for example. The interviews were also analysed in relation to nursery setting and training background and in relation to children who were considered to be learning well or poorly within the nursery. Finally the relationship between the qualitative interview data the rated questions, the specific self-efficacy and the standardised scores on the self-esteem inventory and the First steps screening Test were considered.

The outcomes will be presented first in terms of the seven children and the triad of adults related to them with a particular focus on the child with the highest score on the screening test a child who scored just above average and the child with the lowest score out of the seven target children.

Louise was 4 years 5 months she was the youngest of two girls and lived with her working single parent mother. She had attended C (Greenfield) Nursery for 5 terms. She received a composite score of 60 on the First Step Screening Test this put her one standard deviation above the norm on the standardised scores indicating that she was well above average in her development. She received the highest score out of the seven target children and the third highest score out of the 14 children screened at the three nurseries.

Mother working single parent	2 children	intermediate self esteem	low specific self-efficacy
Kate Nursery manager 4yrs	0 children	intermediate self-esteem	avg specific self-efficacy
Sarah nursery nurse 4yrs	0 children	low self-esteem	avg specific self-efficacy

Louise was described in positive terms by her mother and the two interviewed nursery practitioners. The following comments were made about her personality.

(Mum) She's so funny, bright and bubbly.

(Kate-Nursery practitioner 1) She's a very strong personality, very forthright, very confident...she's quite an affectionate child...comes across as someone who is very able. She's good at organising things, she's quite good at sharing. She has quite a good self image...she's quite a happy little girl.

(Sarah-Nursery practitioner 2) She's a very bright child, talkative, happy...very confident in herself. She's her own person, she's got lots of energy, she's very noisy.

All three adults saw Louise as very much her own person and all gave a rating of 5 for this. The implicit attribution made by all three adults was that within child rather than environmental factors had shaped her personality. This was a positive,stable, global, internal attribution. In a similar vein all 3 adults rated her as mature (1=mature 5=immature) (mum 2, Kate 1, Sarah 2) and again the implicit attribution was positive, stable, global and internal. It's notable that both nursery workers as well as her mother talk about her in terms of largely positive attributes, and that they all quite freely reel off a number of these positive attributes. Even attributes which could be seen as negative or problematic such as her forthrightness or noisiness are described in the context of other positive attributes and are therefore seen as contributing to the overall picture of her in a positive way. When asked what they enjoy about her both nursery practitioners as well as her mother again reel off a number of positive attributes.

(Kate-nursery practitioner 1)She's great fun, she enjoys the things she does. She gives a 100% to what she is doing , if she doesn't want to do something she'll tell you. She's very encouraging of other children. I enjoy the fact that she's such a vibrant little character, I love talking to her.

(Sarah-nursery practitioner 2) She's very happy, she's very easy going, she's very eager to do things, very eager to please people.

Only when they are specifically asked do the two nursery practitioners offer any negative attributions and in this case they only offer one attribution each.

(Sharon-Nursery practitioner 2) She's sometimes in a bad mood and we can't move he, we have to leave her to it.

This fits well with her mothers observation that she can be stubborn and that when she's being difficult the best approach is to just ignore her by leaving the room.

Neither of these two offer any direct explanation for this aspect of her behaviour and the implicit meaning seems to be that this is just another part of her overall personality over which they perceive themselves to have little influence. Kate (Nursery practitioner 1) on the other hand does make an implied attribution.

She can be quite a huffy little girl, quite temperamental. Perhaps they treat her as too adult at home

This is a negative, stable, specific, external attribution which suggests that this behaviour is linked to the way that she is treated at home. It's interesting that all the positive aspects of her personality and behaviour are attributed to within child factors and that the only negative aspect of her behaviour described by this nursery practitioner is attributed in part to an external factor , the way she is treated at home. This could be seen as a reluctance on the part of the practitioner to 'blame' the child for any negative aspect of her behaviour or as part of a wider tendency for negative aspects of children's development and behaviour to be ' blamed' on factors outside of the nursery. This point will be returned to later in the discussion

Perhaps because of the perceived strength of Loiuses personality and her enthusiasm and personal motivation neither her mother or the nursery practitioners feel that they have much influence on her development and again they rated her personality as being the dominant force.(I influence=1, personality =5, mum 5, Kate 4, Sarah 4). These ratings need to be looked at in light of the overall ratings. The average for all the mothers was 4.7 which indicates that mothers see their children's development as strongly determined by their child's personality rather than by their own influence and Louises mother is not far out from the norm in her rating. The average for practitioners is 3.4 which is just half way over the 5 point scale and suggests that although they still see personality as an important force they also feel that they have an influence on the child's development .In the case of Louise both practitioners give a rating of 4 which suggests that they feel that they have less influence on Louise than some of the other nursery children. All three adults were in agreement that Louise had been 'ready ' for nursery when she started (Very ready=1, not ready =5, Mum 1, Kate 1, Sharon 2)

Louise was seen as highly competent as a learner by the two nursery practitioners and both saw her personality as an integral part of her successful approach to learning.

Kate (nursery practitioner 1) She's a very quick learner. She learns much more quickly than the other children.. I think that's to do with her personality, if it fails, OK, she'll learn from the failure. She's a very good learner....Her personality drives her.

Sarah (nursery practitioner 2) I think she's more capable than most children, she's very willing to learn, like persistent, wanting to learn new things.

Louises' mother seemed to take her cue partly form the nursery in evaluating Louises's performance.

I think she's quite bright..well Kate (Nursery practitioner) said she was doing well.

Given the high level of overall agreement between Louises mother and the nursery practitioners it was interesting to note that they appeared to have different views on their expectations for her. Whereas both nursery practitioners thought that they and her mother had similar expectations (same 1 different 5, Kate 2, Sarah 2, mother 4) Louises mother thought that they had somewhat different expectations and that she if anything had higher expectations of her daughter

I want her to get ahead, I want them to have what I didn't have.

This was perhaps reflected in the nursery practitioners seeing her as more persistent and willing to take risks than her mother did.

		mother	Kate	Sarah
similar expectations	1 2 3 4 5 different	4	2	2
Very persistent	1 2 3 4 5 not persistent	3	1	2
Keen to try new things	1 2 3 4 5 cautious	3	1	2

Both practitioners voiced concerns that the nursery set-up was not stretching her sufficiently.

(Kate-nursery practitioner 1) She's starting to get bored, she far exceeds the whole set-up that we have , she's ready for school. ..We can't do too much school's don't like it if nurseries do too much with them, they do ask us not to do it.

Sarah (nursery practitioner 2) It's difficult to keep her interest, everything we give her she can do. We've been challenged by her.

Kate (nursery practitioner) whilst acknowledging the nurseries responsibility in this process uses an attribution style that implies that these difficulties are external to her and not entirely controllable by her.
Louise's mother and the nursery both consider that they have a good relationship and that they can talk to each other about any concerns that they have.

(Louises mother) Kate she's very friendly and although she's in charge, she doesn't come across like that, she's not like a teacher, you can talk to her about anything, all of them are like that.

Louises mother is generally positive about the nursery and thinks that they have a good understanding of her needs as a working mother.

They understand about work.

Despite the good relationship Louises mother doesn't think that she knows about what factors influence the way the nursery staff operate nor does she have any explicit views on the best way to learn although she has informally observed in another part of the interview that her daughter learns best if she is interested in something. She describes herself as not much use at school and as having no further training and therefore ending up in an unskilled job. She feels confident in knowing how to bring Louise up and says that the biggest influence in deciding how to bring her up has been her own experience when younger of looking after children in her extended family.

I'm good with kids I can communicate with them, like, they understand me.

Her awareness that she has higher expectations for her daughter suggests that she might be aware that her daughter is not being sufficiently stretched but this isn't voiced as a direct criticism. On the Culture Free Self-Esteem inventory Louises mother receives an intermediate score but on the specific pre-reading self-efficacy scales she receives the lowest score out of the 13 adults. This may again simply be a reflection of Louises competence and therefore the less interventionist role required by her mother or it may reflect her mothers relative lack of confidence in areas of formal learning where she sees herself as a failure.

In presenting this as a case study of a child who is doing well at nursery both in terms of her social and learning skills and as judged by the adults close to her and by independent testing , a number of questions have to be raised. Is she doing well partly because of the skilled handling of her mother and nursery practitioners, words like strong willed, powerful, forceful and bossy also appear in the interviews which suggest a child who could be quite difficult if not handled appropriately. In the context of the 7 triads of interviews what is striking is the high degree of agreement between Louises mother and the two nursery practitioners (on the rating scales they show the highest level of agreement)

There are also few negative attributions of Louise and only one tentative negative attribution is directed towards her mother by the practitioners. Is it the case that when a child is perceived to be doing well there is less to be 'explained 'and less need for blame or negative attributions. Another question is whether individual nursery practitioners vary in their attributional style in any systematic way and if so what are the factors that seem to underlie this. Allied to this is the question of whether various nursery settings vary collectively in their attributional style and tend to transmit or induct new practitioners in this style.

Richard is 4years 2months and is being brought up by his grandmother who is in her mid forties and some of her four grown up daughters one of whom also has a baby. His grandmother is widowed but does have an ongoing relationship. Richard has been at the nursery for 1 term and previous to that attended another nursery. He received a score of 53 on the First Step Screening Test which put him a little above average on the published norms and highest of the three children from his nursery who were tested.

Grandmother	part time work	4 ch+ 1gch	self esteem- intermediate	specific self-efficacy- high
Lorna	nursery nurse	0 ch	self-esteem- low	specific self-efficacy- low
Mavis	teacher	3 ch	self-esteem-intermediate	specific self-efficacy v.high

Richards grandmother perceives him to be very much like his mother.

(grandmother) He's very like his mother ...and just some ways he looks at you, you see his mother when she was little.

Although Richards grandmother rates him as much like other members of the family on the basis of his similarity to his mother. it is clear in the interview that she attributes this to within child *(genetic) factors rather than environmental influences. Lorna (nursery nurse) similarly rates with in child factors as the dominant force in Richard's personality whereas Mavis (teacher) rates environmental influences as the dominant force

Personality determined by his family or very much himself	Family 1	2	3	4	5 Himself
Grandmother				2*	(5)
Lorna					4
Mavis				2	

(Mavis-teacher) I would say again influenced very much by his family...He is quite spoilt, because gran is bringing him up with two or three of her daughters. His actual mother , I think has married and has another child, although is sometimes on the scene, so he is actually spoilt by two or three aunties aged between twenty and twenty four who sort of play mummy with him, and so he is allowed to do what they want.

Mavis is therefore making a negative, stable, global , external attribution, she follows these comments with more negative comments about his family and about Richard himself.

You know Richard the size of him is quite exceptional, he's enormous for his age.

..although this child is four and a bit, I get the impression they baby him somewhat

She expresses awareness that his physical appearance had initially influenced her perception of him.

It seems awful to say this but initially I thought of Richard as a lump because he was so big, but actually he has quite a pleasant personality.He's quite a helpful little boy

These are the only two positive comments that Mavis makes about his personality apart from when she is specifically asked what she enjoys about him, when she can in fact describe several positives such as the fact that he is amenable and he trys . When asked if there is anything she finds annoying

or irritating she returns to the theme of Richard's weight and personal hygiene(he's had several toileting accidents).

Oh yes there's his pants....his tummy is so big he can't put his socks on..and for a four year old that is dreadful. Especially when he sits and eats every crumb....Richard will have anything he can have.

This is a negative, specific, stable, internal attribution, Mavis's implication being that Richard is overweight because he is 'greedy' and should be able to exercise control over this. She finishes replying to this question by saying,

So the thing that I might dislike about him is that he is too fat.

Overall Mavis makes 23 negative comments about Richard and his family and 9 positive comments, five of which came from specifically asking for positives.If the specifically solicited positive and negative comments are excluded she spontaneously makes 17 negative comments and 4 positive comments. The three major linked themes that her criticisms and negative attributions are centred around are 'spoiling', physical problems and a perceived mismatch in her and the families estimation of Richard's abilities. She uses the term spoilt twice, babied/babyish three times, immature twice and mummy's boy once and gives four examples of what she considers spoiling or indulgence by the family.

I think it's more at home , they might say come and tidy up , and he'll say, I don't want to, so he doesn't have to.

The effect of spoiling by the family is seen as the major negative influence on Richard, this also links to him being overweight although this seems to be attributed in part to the family i.e. external factors and partly to Richard i.e. internal factors.

Mavis talks at some length on five occasions about Richard's intellectual skills, four of these are related to her perception that the family (and particularly his young aunties) consider him to be brighter than she does. She feels that her criteria for judging a child to be competent at something be it walking or reading are more stringent than his families.

Coming from a family where they think he's very bright, I'm beginning to think he's not all that bright at all

This compares with her estimation of Tiffany who scores only 37 on the First Step Screening Test as a bright and clever child (Richard scored 53 which put him slightly above average).

She's a bright little girl, she listens to what is said and she picks it up straight away.

This suggests that either Mavis is using different criteria to the test to define 'brightness' , or that superficial aspects of the child's personality and appearance influence her judgement. Tiffany is described by both her mother and the other nursery worker as a difficult child and by Mavis as needing firm handling but she is also seen by Mavis as friendly and extrovert and keen to answer questions whereas Richard is described as shy and rather lacking in confidence by her. The literature in general suggests that extrovert, confident children tend to be overestimated in their abilities and shy , quiet children tend to be underestimated. In the case of Richard it seems that his physical appearance combined with a rather antagonistic view of his family may have added to this and led Mavis to underestimate his abilities. Croker et al. 1993 point out that many researchers have found that people who are overweight are perceived negatively and in addition are blamed for their condition.

In may also be that parents and teachers have different constructions of what the word bright means. Riddick (1996) found that parents often use the word bright to mean that a child is lively and curious and 'normal' in their development rather than of exceptional ability. Parents were particularly likely to use this term to defend the child if they felt their child was being unfairly criticised by the school as 'slow' or 'lazy'.

Richard's grandma when asked what he is like emphasis his special role in the family as her first grandson . especially as she didn't have a son of her own.

I mean he's my first grandson he gives me pleasure you know.

She feels that her ideas on how to bring him up have come from her experience of bringing up her 4 daughters.

You learn by your mistakes. I'm not doing with Richard what I did with my four, totally the opposite...he doesn't get all his own way as much as what the four lasses did.

At the same time she acknowledges that she has perhaps 'spoilt' him but emphasises that he shouldn't be held responsible for her actions.

He's just a bouncing lad and I mean I've spoiled him, so you can't blame him for what I've done.

His grandmother suggests that Richard can discriminate between how he can behave with her and how he should behave with other people.

He understands that he can't stand anywhere and say to people, I'm not doing this, I'm not doing that.He does it with me, but that's between me and him. But I know he's got a different nature with other people.

Reid and Vallsiner (1986) found in their research on mothers ideas on children's behaviour that they made an important distinction between misbehaviour in public and private settings with the same transgressions being seen as much more serious if carried out in public.

Both Richard's grandmother (1 or 2) and Lorna (1) rate him as easy to handle whereas Mavis rates him as middling (3) Similarly grandmother and Lorna rate him as quite mature(2) for his age whereas Mavis rates him (4) as relatively immature for his age. Richards grandmother says that she would rate him as relatively mature because he knows right from wrong (moral maturity) whereas Mavis says she rates him as relatively immature because of his toileting accidents and in her terms 'putting on a baby act' when he wants to go home because of a stomach upset (self-help and social immaturity) .Lorna doesn't directly explain her rating but does comment that he settled in well at nursery and was one of the few children not to cry (social maturity). In other triads it was also observed that where there were differences of opinion over maturity that this was usually because different aspects of the child's development were being taken into account in making this judgement. Parents were more likely to judge the child on cognitive or linguistic grounds whereas the nursery staff were more likely to judge children on their self-help and social skills and whether they settled happily into nursery.

Lorna when asked about Richard's personality comments that he doesn't have much confidence and although he tries to be friendly to the other children they tend to reject him. When asked why this might be she comments

(Lorna-nursery nurse) It might be personal problem, because he smells a bit..so I don't know if it's that or a personality problem.

Lorna when asked what she finds enjoyable about him or irritating about him finds these questions quite hard to answer because Richard in her experience rarely elicits adult attention and tends to be inconspicuous.

Enjoyable, I don't really..but he's got a nice personality, and he's very helpful.I can't think of anything else to say about him really.

Lorna uses the term spoilt 5 times in her account of Richard.

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I think he's very spoilt.Spoilt at home you know.

She unlike Mavis doesn't think that he is spoilt in terms of personal attention as well as material goods

I don't think they seem to spend a lot of time with him. I know he's sort of spoilt, it's just he's given things to sort of shut him up. You know like the bike.

When Lorna is asked why she thinks Robert has been sent to nursery she uses the term 'to get rid of him' three times and 'out from under their feet twice'. Lorna by her own admission has had little contact with the family and says that Mavis has the major role in this. She also observes that members of the family don't stay and chat and this she takes as an indication of their lack of interest. Given her limited contact with the family it raises the question of what evidence she is basing her judgements on.

Robert's grandma in talking about his learning says

He'll sit for ages if you just sit and read to him. He's a member of the library he gets books out every month.

I mean he's not allowed to go out on the street unless one of us is with him

When asked why she sent him to nursery the reasons she gives are strictly educational.

To see that he gets a decent education.

On numerous occasions during the interview respecting Richard's autonomy is underlined by his grandmother.

Robert's his own person you know. I mean I'm not going to push him into something he doesn't want to do. It's not fair.It should be what he wants.

When asked how he has settled into the nursery she makes the following response.

He loves it.I mean if he didn't want to come in the afternoons I wouldn't have it , I would've said we'll settle for the mornings.

This account by his grandmother clearly differs in how much attention she perceives him to have and the reasons for sending him to nursery. The overall message seems to be that none of the three adults in this triad feel that they know each other well and that sometimes this leads to misattribution and lack of understanding.

How well do you feel you know his mother/ teacher	well	1	2	3	4	5	not at all
Grandmother						5	
Mavis				3			
Lorna						4	

To be fair to the nursery practitioners. Richards grandmother plays a significant role in this relationship in that she sees clear boundaries between home and school and sees little need for either to have a closer relationship or to know more about the other setting.

What I do, it's got nothing to do with the school, it's Richard they're teaching not me.

Richards grandmother makes several comments that imply that for her home and nursery are separate worlds and should remain so. This might be seen as part of a wider collective cultural viewpoint on the relationship between home and school or as specific to her particular cognitive style which seems to demarcate a number of clear boundaries. On the other hand there are clear examples in her interview of her concern to understand or explain aspects of Richards behaviour at nursery such as his

recent and unexpected toileting accidents. In this case she expects to collaborate with the nursery and talks about 'explaining 'to the nursery teacher her uncertainty and various theories on why it may have happened. Hannon(1995) has argued that because of the imbalance in power between parents and professionals, that it is professionals with their institutional position and greater power who should take the greater responsibility for parent teacher relations.

The third child to be considered is Emma who like Richard also had Mavis and Lorna as her main nursery workers.

Emma is 4.1 years, she comes from a 2 parent family and has one older brother. She has attended nursery for 2 terms and received a score of 35 on the First Steps screening test which falls into the category of definite concern and is the lowest score received by the 7 study children. Emma's mother receives a score in the high category for self-esteem and specific self-efficacy. Both her mother and the two nursery workers express concern over various aspects of her formal learning but differ in the attributions they make about these difficulties.

Influenced by family	1	2	3	4	5	By self
Mother					4	
Lorna		1				
Mavis		1				

Emma's mother is quite clear that her personality and approach to learning are due to within child factors.

Herself (definitely).She's nervous. She's lovely but she's nervous, that's the main thing, she's always been nervous from a baby.

Her mother is concerned about this aspect of her daughter and several times mentions that she would like her to have more confidence.

I try to make her more confident, I want her to be more outgoing.

Kagan (1992) suggests that roughly one child in seven is born with a strong genetic predisposition to shyness and anxiety and although environmental factors can exacerbate or ameliorate this to some extent they have a relatively limited effect. Both the nursery workers perceive her personality and shyness as directly attributable to her family.

Lorna- Her family.She just says I can't I can't, I think it definitely has a lot to do with her family.

Mavis. Her family quite definitely, she's the youngest, she is possibly spoilt, in that her mum does an awful lot for her.

Emma's mother in contrast says

I try to get her to do things for herself as much as I can.

Mavis although she 'blames ' the family to some extent also empathises with Emma.

She's festering with self-doubt, but having been such a child myself '

Lorna on the other hand although she 'blames' the family also makes a number of negative comments about Emma.

She hasn't any ideas of her own, she's a sheep, she just follows around.

She doesn't try her best ,the potential is there. She's a little bit lazy I would say she is lazy.

When asked specifically if there is anything she finds annoying about Emma she replies

She doesn't try to the best of her ability.

Both Emmas mother and the two nursery workers note that despite being an amenable and well behaved child who is well supported at home she appears to be having considerable difficulties with early pre reading and writing skills whereas her mother notes that at home her language skills are quite advanced and she enjoys drawing and talks non stop.This raises important questions about Emma's learning and the kind of intervention that would help her. It may be that she has specific learning difficulties in the pre-literacy area and is already aware and anxious about these and is thus reluctant to do tasks at which she thinks she is going to fail or it may simply be that her anxious disposition is impairing her learning in a public setting. But it appears that the nursery workers in attributing these difficulties to her family are thus distracted from the task of identifying more specifically what her difficulties are and what can best be done to support her and her family. Croll and Moses (1985) found that when 428 primary school teachers were asked about children's learning difficulties in only 2.5 per cent of cases were school factors thought to play apart whereas over 40 per cent of the difficulties were ascribed to environmental difficulties outside of school (i.e. the family) Alessi (1988) in a similar study in the USA of 5,000 referrals to school psychologists found that home environmental factors or general within child factors were always given as the cause of learning difficulties and failure was never attributed to the curriculum.

Summary

This is only a pilot study but it does raise important questions about how children are perceived and more particularly what kind of attributions are made when they are thought to be having difficulties with aspects of their learning and development. The importance of this is if difficulties are attributed to the wrong causes there is less likeli hood of them being properly understood and appropriately supported. Carugati (1990) has suggested that some teachers defend themselves against 'failure' by denying responsibility for children who fail. Connel (1987) suggests that some teachers rely on stereotypes such as the unsupportive or overprotective family to help them explain the behaviour of children they perceive as difficult or unresponsive and this he argues is a survival mechanism for them which helps them to cope in the face of a difficult and demanding job. An important question that arises is whether external (eg nursery organisation, training etc) or internal factors (eg personality, self-esteem etc) or an interaction between the two play the major part in prediposing some nursery workers towards this attributional style. In this study it was clear that the the two workers in the nursery attached to a school both used this defensive attribution style to a greater or lesser extent for all three of the children they were interviewed about. In the other nursery setting the practioners were less inclined to use this style and were generally far more positive in their attributions of both the children and the families. A larger scale study is needed to ascertain what internal and external factors influence attribution style. Some of the questions that can be asked are

1. Are practioners more likely to use this negative attribution style if they perceive a child to be failing?

2. Do certain nursery organisations and ethos increase or decrease this style of attribution?

3. How critical is the relationship between practioner and parent in influencing attributions?

4. Does the training of practioners have any influence on attribuution style?

5. How far do practioners own experiences both as a child or parent influence their attributions

6. Is there any systematic link between self-esteem, self-efficacy and attribution style?